

Spring 2003

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### Recommended Citation

Fowler, Ryan (2003) "Ernest Hemingway's Depiction of Human Interaction," *ESSAI*: Vol. 1, Article 15.  
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol1/iss1/15>

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## Ernest Hemingway's Depiction of Human Interaction

by Ryan Fowler

(English 130)

The Assignment: Write a five-page analysis of any literary element based on your careful reading of Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants."

On the surface, Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" is a story about a man and a woman drinking, having a disconnected and boring conversation, and waiting to be taken to their next destination. But, in order to fully understand what it is Hemingway is attempting to convey to us we must scratch beneath the surface. The man and the woman appear to be having a nonchalant and emotionally detached conversation, but Hemingway makes it clear that this is merely a superficial façade aimed at creating a defense for one against the other. Instead, it creates a barrier between the two.

Immediately we feel the tension between the man and the women. It is obvious they are uncomfortable with their current situation and are finding ways to find fault with one another. Their conversation seems disconnected, or at best, superficial. Perhaps, this demonstrates Hemingway's view of the gap between men and women. The two discuss such superficial topics as the hills that resemble white elephants and the paint on the beaded curtain in an attempt to somehow disguise the chasm that exists between each other. For instance, the woman even says, "I want to try this new drink. That's all we do, isn't it – look at things and try new drinks?" "I guess so the," the man replies. "The girl looks across the hills" and suddenly their conversation comes to a halt. The lack of conversational flow and their choice of seemingly meaningless topics suggest to us that they cannot and will not change. Hemingway gives us flat characters that are unable to break away from their very nature and exhibit free will.

In addition, Hemingway is a master of wielding allusions and innuendos to communicate his thoughts. He chooses the name Jig – a word meaning happy dance, but also a reference to the phrase, "the jig is up". How ironic this is, since the woman is pregnant and typically we would think of that as a joyous time in a woman's life. Instead, we get a sense the two feel that their seemingly carefree lives are suddenly being burdened by this unwanted responsibility. Furthermore, by avoiding the actual word abortion all together, Hemingway illustrates perfectly the dirty, shameful feelings that often accompany an abortion. Even in the title, he is making allusions to abortion. A "white elephants" gift is an unwanted gift. In this case, the unwanted gift is the child in her womb.

The way in which Hemingway uses the rhythm of words is also remarkable. By the end of the story the man and the woman especially, look as if they are at their wits end. The woman is agitated at the underlying tension. The man constantly assures the woman, "...it's all perfectly natural." Moments later he exclaims, "I know it's perfectly simple." But these words offer the woman little comfort and they give us a sense that things are not all that simple, but rather they are terribly complex. At the end of the story, the woman claims, "I feel fine." What an understatement this is. The phrase helps us to identify the woman's true emotional state.

The real communication in this story is not coming from the two characters' actual words. It is coming from the allusions that permeate their conversation. The two characters have different feelings and are hiding seemingly opposing agendas, as well. Clearly, the man wishes desperately that the problem would simply go away, while Jig appears unsure and troubled, not knowing what the best solution would be.

The man is attempting to tactfully persuade Jig to have the abortion. He explains, "It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig." Later, he urges, "It's the best thing to do. But I don't want you to do it if you don't really want to." The man is selfish and is only concerned with his own comfort and secure lifestyle. The girl gives the impression that she understands what the man's true intentions are. She knows his motive is to urge her to have the abortion. We can see this by her response to his persistence.

Jig exclaims, “Can’t we maybe stop talking?” Instead of listening to him rationalize and examine why or why not they should go through with the operation, she prefers to hear nothing at all. This is indicative of the fact that he does not understand how Jig feels and cares more about his own misfortune than her despair.

Still, the woman’s response and tone seem to waver throughout the story. She suspiciously questions, “What will we do afterwards?”, after the man reassures her that the operation is completely safe and simple. But then, she exclaims that they could do anything or go anywhere with the same amount of zeal as she had had before. When the man agrees with her, she suddenly rushes back to her feelings of despair. It appears as if she wants to make the decision on her own. Although she asks for the man’s advice, she honestly does not want to hear it.

The woman’s main concern is whether the man will still feel the same way about her after she has gone through with the operation or not. Although he reassures her that everything will be the same, we have to question his sincerity. After all, he spends the entire story pressuring her to do what he desires in order to avoid the inconvenience of having a child. However, the woman is not completely blameless herself. She is basing the decision completely on whether or not the man will remain with her in the future.

To truly understand the theme of this story, we must focus on the dialogue between the man and the woman. True, at the heart of the story is the issue of abortion. However, the central theme of the story is not abortion; rather, it is the relationship between the two characters. It is the pressure the man applies to the woman and the sarcastic way she deals with that pressure.

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#### Work Cited

Hemingway, Ernest. “Hills Like White Elephants”. *Intro to Literature*. 8<sup>th</sup> Edition. Eds. Jerome Beaty, Alison Booth, J. Paul Hunter, Kelly J. Mays. New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company. 75-78.